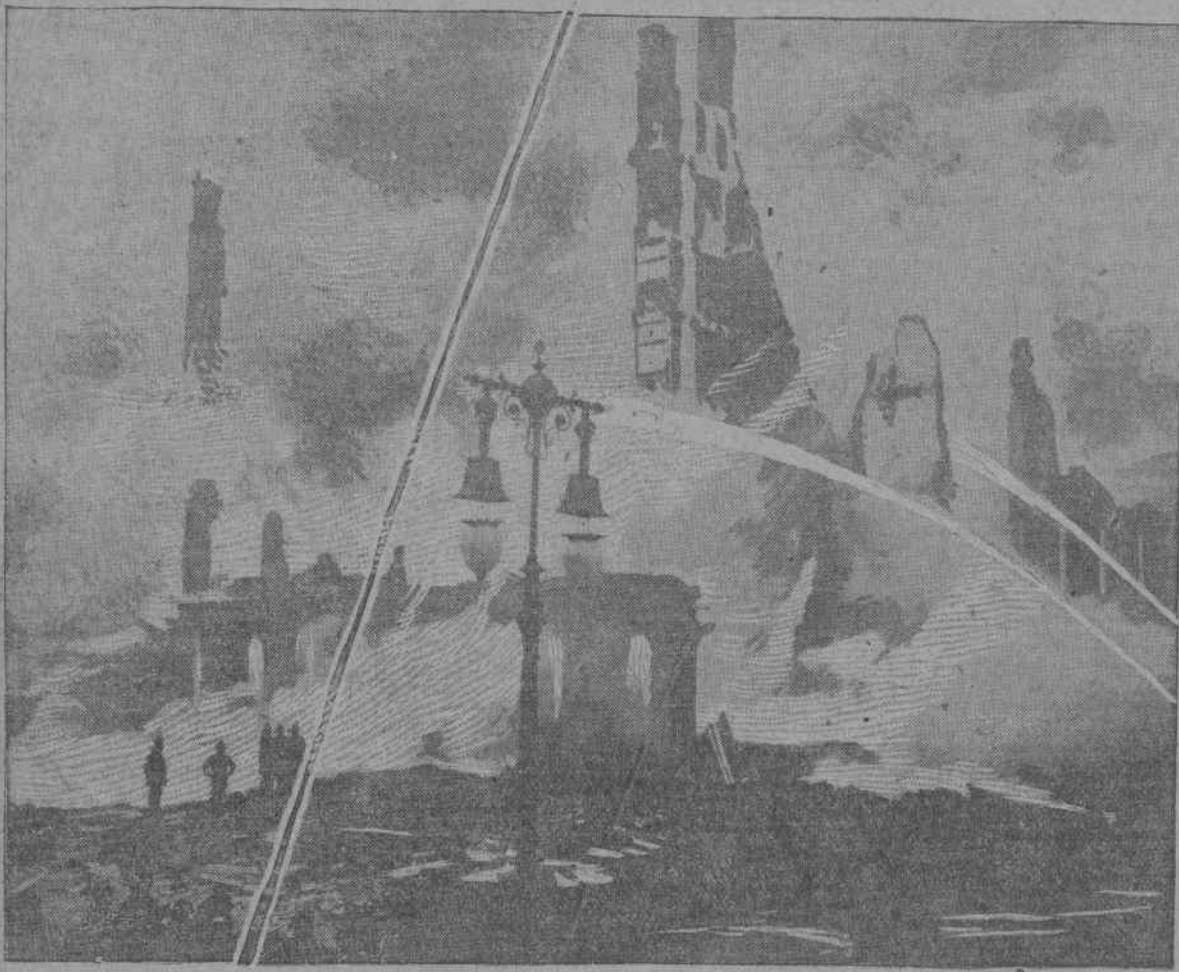


HOTEL A FIRE TRAP—WHO IS RESPONSIBLE?



The Ruins from Fifth Avenue.

DANGER HAD LONG BEEN KNOWN.

Insurance Men Fixed a Rate of \$145 a Thousand on the Windsor.

G. Wetherbee, of Hawk & Wetherbee, the former proprietors of the Windsor Hotel, watched the fire from the top of his present establishment, the Manhattan Hotel, surrounded by many of his partners and the members of the Transportation Club, whose rooms are on the top floor of the building.

Mr. Wetherbee, who has been in the hotel business for about forty years, was visibly affected as he saw his former property crumble into ruins.

"It is not a surprise to me," he said to a Journal reporter, "and many people can tell you that I have often predicted it. That building was a death trap, a fire trap in every sense of the word, and the efforts of any fire department to save it, once the fire had a good start, would be futile.

"The fault lies in its construction. It was hastily put up on a design that was antiquated even at the time it was built, and the materials used were of the cheapest possible description. To manage that property meant one continual round of repairs, and the amount of them can render safe an insecure building.

"While it was in our charge we had to exercise ceaseless vigilance, and it is to that and the faithfulness of our watchmen that I attribute our escape from such a terrible catastrophe as this has proved to be.

Mr. Leland, the present proprietor, undoubtedly exercised the same care that we did, for he is an experienced hotel man, and I suppose the origin of the fire will stay a mystery.

"How unsafe a building the hotel was is shown by the insurance rates we had to pay. Why, toward the last the companies were demanding \$145 per \$1,000, and that, combined with the increased rental the Goetz estate asked, was too much for us, so we gave it up.

"One of the most dangerous defects in the building was the space between the walls and between the floors and ceilings of the rooms beneath. These openings, from a few inches to more than a foot in width, would allow any fire once started to spread and run along the woodwork. To this I attribute the rapid destruction of the building and the sudden falling of the walls.

As Mr. Wetherbee was speaking he pointed down at the conflagration and called the reporter's attention to the Forty-seventh street addition to the hotel, which, though burning fiercely on every floor at the time, was still making a better fight against the flames than had the main structure.

"Now you will see the truth of my remarks," he said.

"That addition was made with deadened, or filled, walls. I insisted upon it, and the estate complied with my wishes, though reluctantly. Had the main building been so constructed the fire would not have spread one-tenth as rapidly and its patrons would have had time enough to get away with their lives and possibly with some of their effects.

"It is a Godsend that this did not happen at night. The loss of life then, with people awakened from their sleep by flames and stifling smoke, would have been too appalling to think about."



When the Roof Fell In.

"HOTEL A FIRETRAP, DOOMED BEFORE ALARM WAS GIVEN."

Chief Bonner Explains the Tinder Box Construction of the Burned Building and Says That for Some Reason the Firemen Were Not Called Promptly—Their Work Heroic, but Against Overwhelming Odds—Many in the Ruins.

The awful responsibility for the terrible loss of life in the Hotel Windsor fire is to be placed on city officials, prompted by Mayor Van Wyck, informally discussed the fire at the Democratic Club last night, and decided that a rigid investigation must be instituted at once. Richard Croker also said earnestly and emphatically that "something must be done."

This investigation will begin to-day. No time will be lost in placing the responsibility where it belongs.

If it lies with the Building Department the records will show on whose shoulders it should be placed. These records will be exhausted this morning.

It may be that the law is responsible, that vested rights, which existed prior to the passage of the present building laws, permitted the existence of a palatial fire trap such as the hotel proved to be. If the law is responsible, it will be speedily amended.

Other Hotels Like It.

There are other hotel fire traps in this city which the same laws affect.

Yesterday's fire has emphasized the necessity for prompt action in the matter of the "other hotels" which are pointed out and known to the Department of Buildings as dangerous structures.

Chief Bonner, of the Fire Department, will be called into consultation when the authorities meet to investigate.

He has often wondered what he and his firemen would do if a fire broke out in the dead of night in certain hotels in this city.

Another Death-Trap Set.

At a recent fire Chief Bonner said, mentioning one of the largest hotels on Broadway:

"God knows what would happen if a fire got a start late at night in that hotel. The entire department would be needed to extinguish a blaze there, and the guests would not have time to escape.

"The halls are narrow and run cross-cross. There are hundreds of rooms, and the hotel is always a busy one, full of guests.

"The building is a very large one, and old, and a veritable tinder-box. God alone could save the human beings caught in such a trap. I always regard with dread any alarm of fire coming at night from a box in the neighborhood of this hotel. And worse still, there are other structures of its kind in the city."

Not Reached by Law.

The building laws of to-day do not afford a remedy. All that the Building Department can do in such cases, it is said, is to compel the hotel proprietors to put up fire escapes and so-called safety appliances for enabling imperilled guests to escape from their rooms.

The fire trap which Chief Bonner referred to, like the Windsor Hotel, was built before the present building laws were enacted.

The rights of owners were regarded in those laws more than were the lives of human beings. Under the new law the old hotel fire traps are allowed to exist. The laws compel the use of fire escapes on the old structures, but even with these they are in the eyes of firemen and the building authorities, constant menaces to the lives of those who pay for shelter in them.

Brady Knew Danger.

Superintendent of the Building Department, Thomas J. Brady, knew this well. He said last night to a Journal reporter:

"The Windsor Hotel I knew to be an old building but the department could do nothing but make the proprietor put up fire escapes, which was done. The rights of the owners under the law had to be respected. The Windsor Hotel was built when the laws were different, and the vested rights of the proprietors had to be regarded.

The law regarding the existence of hotels was as the Windsor was.

There are many hotels just as old and some of them worse, in my opinion, than the Windsor.

I regret that the department has been powerless to do anything to meet the needs of the old hotels.

The Windsor, however, was not, in my opinion, a fire trap, because it was provided with fire escapes. All that could be done to make it a safe place was done, and I believe the proprietors went a little further than the law really demanded of them.

It is a terrible fire. I shall never forget it.

Building Was Flimsy.

"During the fire and before the walls fell

many of the inspectors of my department and myself were present. When the gaps appeared in the burning building I realized then the flimsy character of the building.

"After the fall of the building several of the inspectors and I examined the material in the fallen walls and made observations as closely as the then existing circumstances would permit, of the nature of the constructive work.

"We agreed that such hotels as the Windsor were should not be allowed by law to stand."

"Al" Johnson, secretary to Superintendent Brady, and Chief Inspector Patrick

Andrews were also at the fire when the walls fell. They were instrumental in saving lives by their prompt action in ordering back the crowd which stood on the sidewalk, knowing the official means that the Windsor was a tinder box; they could have seen the fall of the walls was inevitable when the flames took possession of the building.

"The walls were going to fall," these city officials shouted to the crowd, which fell back. The firemen, too, took warning and moved toward the middle of the street. A minute later the walls began to crumble and crash into the street.



SEARCHING FOR THE DEAD IN THE SMOULDERING RUINS.

The scene at night. The firemen turning over the cooling wreckage of the great fire.

Chief Bonner made the following statement concerning the fire and the work of the men in his department last night:

"I fear that the ruins of the Windsor cover many more victims than we can estimate to-night. For some reason there was great delay in sending in the alarm.

"Frequently, as a matter of pride, hotel people try to put out fires with their own appliances. Whether this was attempted at the Windsor before the alarm was sent to the department, I am unable to say, but we know that the building was doomed before the alarm was sent.

"One minute exactly elapsed between the sounding of the gong in the Forty-third street engine house and the moment the firemen of that company reached Fifth avenue on their way to the burning hotel. As they turned into the avenue they could see people leaping from the windows of the Windsor.

"Without a moment's delay I hurried to the scene. The first thing I did was to order the firemen out of the building. They got out none too soon. Ten or fifteen minutes longer and probably half of the men of the twenty-three engine companies and the five hook and ladder companies represented would have perished.

"The fatally rapid action of the fire was due to the character of the hotel's construction. It was built a quarter of a century ago, when there were no fire regulations governing the building of hotels. The Windsor was a fire trap. Such an edifice could not be put up within the city limits of New York to-day.

"It had not a single cross wall or division wall to give compactness and security to the structure and act as a restraint to possible fires. In modern buildings for school and hotel purposes it is required that division walls shall not be more than 50 feet apart. The Windsor was in no wise fireproof. It was built of brick, but all the interior and all the corridors, with the exception of a few iron beams serving in place of cross walls, were of wood.

"Then on each floor there was a great circular corridor, unprovided with fire stops of any description. As soon as the flames reached a floor they swept unimpeded around this unobstructed circle, and every avenue of escape within the hotel was cut off.

"After I arrived at the fire but few rescues were effected, but these I believe to be among the most heroic in the history of the New York department.

"Fireman Ford, of Hook and Ladder Company, No. 2, had climbed to the sixth floor, when from a window far to one side of his ladder a woman appeared crying for help. He fastened a grappling ladder to the sill of her window, and on this frail bridge climbed over, took the woman in his arms, and clinging like a fly to his slanting support, managed to reach the main ladder. Then the long descent to the street was made. It was a brave rescue.

"Within fifteen minutes after my arrival the big roof tanks filled with water began to fall through the gutted building. They crashed sheer to the cellar, completely piercing the hotel structure. This left the walls no support, and they fell in with a roar.

"Undoubtedly many people were carried down with the hotel's collapse. In fact, after the tanks and the walls had fallen, a woman, emerging from the wreck, appeared in the area calling for help. She was quickly rescued. She was a servant employed in the hotel. How she escaped is a miracle."

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